

Cuban Missile Crisis

1962



On October 22, 1962, after reviewing newly acquired intelligence, President John F. Kennedy informed the world that the Soviet Union was building secret missile bases in Cuba, a mere 90 miles off the shores of Florida. After weighing such options as an armed invasion of Cuba and air strikes against the missiles, Kennedy decided on a less dangerous response. In addition to demanding that Russian Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev remove all the missile bases and their deadly contents, Kennedy ordered a naval quarantine (blockade) of Cuba in order to prevent Russian ships from bringing additional missiles and construction materials to the island. In response to the American naval blockade, Premier Khrushchev authorized his Soviet field commanders in Cuba to launch their tactical nuclear weapons if invaded by U.S. forces. Deadlocked in this manner, the two leaders of the world's greatest nuclear superpowers stared each other down for seven days until Khrushchev blinked. On October 28, thinking better of prolonging his challenge to the United States, the Russian Premier conceded to President Kennedy's demands by ordering all Soviet supply ships away from Cuban waters and agreeing to remove the missiles from Cuba's mainland. After several days of teetering on the brink of nuclear holocaust, the world breathed a sigh of relief.

Although it may seem that the events of the seven days between October 22 and 28 unfolded at a blinding pace, the entire incident which has come to be collectively known as the "Cuban missile crisis" was the culmination of a longer process. In June of 1961, while still in the early months of his presidency, Kennedy attended a summit with Premier Khrushchev in Vienna to discuss cold war confrontations between the east and west, in particular the situation in Berlin. The failure of the two leaders to resolve any of their differences during the summit led Khrushchev to view Kennedy as a weak president who lacked the power or support to negotiate any meaningful concessions in the arms race. Fueled by concerns that the U.S. had more nuclear missiles than the Soviet arsenal, and, more importantly, that some of the American missiles were based a mere 150 miles from its borders, in Turkey, the Soviet leadership grew increasingly desperate to somehow tip the balance of power in its favor. The showdown in Cuba may indeed have been the result of such accumulating anxiety among the Soviet political elite.

Viewed in hindsight, it is not surprising that the Soviets chose Cuba as their stage of operations against the U.S. Ever since his rise to power in 1959, Cuban Premier Fidel Castro struggled to survive America's efforts to "encourage" his political demise. When General Castro came to power, the U.S. stopped buying Cuban sugar and refused to supply its former trading partner with much needed oil. After weathering the failed Bay of Pigs invasion by CIA-backed Cuban exiles in 1961, Castro observed as U.S. armed forces staged a mock invasion of a Caribbean island in 1962. The purpose of the invasion was to overthrow a leader whose name, Ortsac, was Castro spelled backwards. Although Ortsac was a fictitious name, Castro "got the message" and soon became convinced that the U.S. was serious about invading Cuba. Sensing an opportunity to gain a strategic foothold in America's "back yard," Khrushchev eagerly extended an offer of assistance to the desperate Cuban general. The Soviet Premier offered Castro new trade opportunities, to ease the effects of U.S. sanctions, and a promise of protection from U.S. hostilities. The cozy alliance which ensued between Castro and Khrushchev laid the ground for what culminated in a Soviet missile base in Cuba and ended in the Cuban missile crisis.

Wasatch County Veterans List
CUBAN MISSILE CRISIS
(NATIONAL GUARD CALL-UP)
(115th US Engineers)
OCTOBER 22, 1962

Call, Donald J.
Carlson, Paul Dean
Davis, Thomas Bert
Glazier, Rex
Johnson, Lowell
Mair, Floyd Leroy
Provost, Thomas LaRen
Seiter, Carl William
Smith, James R.
Wilson, Gordon Paul

Marvin Draper